DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 641 EA 028 092

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TITLE Behaviors That Create a Caring Learning Community.
PUB DATE Nov 96
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Regional Council on Education Administration (Savannah, GA, November 10-12, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Environment; Cognitive Processes; *Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; Factor Analysis; Helping Relationship; Higher Education; Interpersonal Relationship; *Teacher Behavior; Teacher Education; *Teacher Influence; *Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Caring

ABSTRACT

Although some research data support the view that a "caring learning community" is important to student outcomes, there is a lack of literature describing the administrative behaviors that create such a community. This paper describes findings of a study that identified the behaviors used by teachers to create a caring learning community. A survey was administered to three groups of graduate students in the Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations at the State University of West Georgia. The survey asked the graduate students to describe the behaviors they used to let students know that they care about them. The responses of the first group of students (n=116) were used to generate a list of caring behaviors. The responses of a second group of students (n=70) reduced the list from 30 to 26 behaviors. The final version of the survey was administered to a third group of students (n=99) to determine the number of factors measured by the caring behaviors and the usage frequency of the behaviors. The study identified five behavior categories that contribute to a caring school community: the ability to reduce anxiety, the willingness to listen, the reward of appropriate behavior, the conveyance of friendship, and the appropriate use of positive and negative criticism. Six tables are included. The appendix contains a sample of the survey. (LMI)

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BEHAVIORS THAT CREATE A CARING LEARNING COMMUNITY

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EA 028 092

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BEHAVIORS THAT CREATE A CARING LEARNING COMMUNITY

Introduction

Just how important is a caring learning community? The September, 1996 issue of Educational Leadership contains a number of articles dealing with the theme "creating a climate for learning." In that issue Alfie Kohn stated that creating a caring community would help students develop positive values and a love of learning. In that same issue Lewis, Schaps, and Watson, described the "caring community of learners" they have created at their school. They believe that "creating such a community is crucial to children's learning and citizenship" (p.17). Freiburg also wrote about the need to create caring classrooms in that issue. Based on some of the articles in this issue, one could conclude that a caring learning community is important if you want "create a climate for learning." Cooper (1996) stated that nothing can replace caring about the well-being of children. In addition to these opinions, there is some research that supports the premise that a caring learning community is important.

Bulach, Malone, and Castleman (1995) in their work on climate and achievement found a significant positive correlation ($r = +.52$) between climate and achievement. Two of the subscales measure caring behaviors. One subscale measures levels of trust in a school building and the other measures an area called environment. Correlational data for these two subscales with the overall climate scores shows a strong positive relationship (Bulach & Malone, 1994). For example, the relationship for the environment subscale with climate is $+.91$ and trust with climate is $+.45$. Since a measure of caring behaviors is part of these

two subscales, one could conclude that caring behaviors are important if you want to "create a climate for learning."

The research of Brown (1995) adds further support for the importance of "caring" as an important factor in learning. Her research involved 3264 college students who rated 230 college instructors. She found that "caringness" was identified by students as the most important quality they looked for in an instructor.

Purpose of Research

While there are opinions and some research data to support the position that a "caring learning community" is important, there doesn't appear to be much written about those behaviors that create a "caring learning community." Consequently, the purpose of this research was to determine those behaviors used by teachers that create a "caring learning community." A secondary purpose was to determine the usage frequency of these behaviors by teachers in their classrooms.

Determining whether someone cares about you is a first step in the building of a trust relationship between administrators, teachers, and students. Some level of trust is required for students to risk opening themselves to learning, and it is a commonly held opinion that all learning contains an element of risk. Consequently, it is important that teachers and administrators become aware of behaviors that create a "caring learning community."

Methodology

Three groups of graduate students in the Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations at the State University of West Georgia were involved in this study. The first group consisted of one hundred and sixteen students in the education administration preparation program who were asked to describe the behaviors they used to let students know that they cared about them. Based on these descriptions, a list of behaviors was generated. Through use of the Nominal Group Technique, this list was reduced to 30 behaviors. A survey was constructed using a Likert type scale and administered to a second group of 70 graduate students in the program. A factor analysis was completed on this data and, based on the results, the survey was reduced to 26 behaviors (see Appendix A). The reliability of the survey instrument using a Cronbach Alpha was +.77. The opinions of 116 practicing teachers and administrators were used to determine that the instrument had construct validity.

The final version of the survey consisted of four items that collected demographic data and 26 items that measured caring behaviors. It was administered to a third group of 99 students to determine the number of factors measured by the caring behaviors and the usage frequency of these behaviors as they interact with students. The teachers were graduate students in the Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations at the State University of West Georgia during the summer quarter of 1996.

For scoring purposes a score of "1" was assigned to a response of "Never" and a score of "5" was assigned to a response of "Always." Scores of "2, 3, & 4" were assigned to the responses for the rest of the scale. Two of the 26 items were reverse scored. They were items 24 and 29.

A factor analysis and a rotated factor matrix were completed on the survey instrument. Five distinct factors were identified that accounted for 45% of the variance. The five factors are the following: anxiety, listening, rewards, friends, and criticism.

Factor #1 accounted for 17% of the variance and dealt with an area we have labeled "ability to reduce anxiety." Ten of the 26 survey items loaded on this factor. Factor loadings ranged from .7605 to .3511 (see Table #1). Behaviors in this factor are the following: creating an environment where students feel safe; teaching at their ability level; enforcing the same rules for all students; being positive; reinforcing good behavior; maintaining an orderly classroom, and cueing them when they don't understand. It is interesting that greeting them as they enter the classroom, calling them by name, and maintaining eye contact also loaded on this factor. Apparently, these behaviors provide some assurance to students that the teacher "cares" thereby reducing anxiety levels.

---insert Table #1 here---

There were two factors in the factor matrix for factor #1 that did not seem to fit, i.e., inform parents about student progress, and give students opportunities to make decisions. Consequently, a rotated factor matrix was also computed on the data. The rotated factor matrix had "informing parents" as part of the rewards factor and "students making decisions" as part of the listening factor. Consequently, these behaviors were included with those factors instead of factor #1.

Factor #2 dealt with an area labeled "willingness to listen" that accounted for 8% of the variance. Four behaviors loaded on this factor with factor loadings ranging from .6915 to .2515 (see Table #2). They are the following: letting students make decisions; asking students for their opinion; make time for them before and after school; and taking a personal interest outside the classroom. The factor loading for making time for students was very low, but it did not load any higher on the other factors. It does fit with the other behaviors in this factor even though the loading is low.

---insert Table #2 here---

Factor #3 dealt with an area labeled "rewarding good behavior" that accounted for 7% of the variance. Four behaviors loaded on this factor with factor loadings ranging from .7380 to .5878 (see Table #3). They are the following: display student work, provide treats and goodies, let students help in the classroom, and inform parents about student progress.

---insert Table #3 here---

Factor #4 dealt with an area labeled "being a friend" that accounted for 7% of the variance. Five behaviors loaded on this factor with factor loadings ranging from .6027 to .3735 (see Table #4) . They are the following: let students have fun at my expense, eat lunch with them, return work promptly, and intervene when they are being picked on.

---insert Table #4 here---

Factor #5 dealt with an area labeled "appropriate use of criticism" that accounted for 6% of the variance. Four behaviors loaded on this factor with factor loadings of .7125 and .2882 (see Table #5). They are the following: use sarcasm with students; use negative criticism with students; recognize them for extra-curricular achievement. and recognize them for academic achievement. Sarcasm and criticism are reverse scored so that a response of "often" or "always" would result in a low score instead of a high score as was the case with the other two behaviors in this factor. Recognizing students for academic achievement loaded on Factor #1 (.4463), but it seems to fit better with this factor.

---insert Table #5 here---

Construction of the survey instrument accomplished one purpose of this research, i.e., to identify those behaviors educators can use to create a "caring learning community." The next step was to find out how often teachers used these behaviors in their interactions with students. Consequently, the data was analyzed for frequency of usage. The behaviors are ranked from those most frequently used to those least frequently used (see Table #6).

---insert Table #6 here---

The data in Table #6 clearly indicate that behaviors associated with Factor #1 are the ones most frequently used. This is followed by behaviors which show that you are a friend (factor #4). One behavior in this category, however, is used the least, i.e., eating lunch with students. This behavior occurs sometimes, but not frequently. Behaviors that fall into the listening category ranked third with appropriate use of criticism coming in fourth, and rewarding good behavior is used the least.

Discussion

Based on the data, five broad categories of behaviors that administrators and teachers can use to create a "caring learning community" have been identified. They are the following:

- ability to reduce anxiety;
- willingness to listen;

- rewarding appropriate behavior;
- being a friend; and
- appropriate use of positive and negative criticism.

Behaviors that reduce anxiety are clearly the favorite among teachers as the frequency of usage scores range from a high of 4.7 to a low of 4.28 indicating that teachers use these behaviors somewhere between often and always. All ten behaviors have a higher ranking than behaviors associated with any other factor. Consequently, in their attempts to create a "caring learning community," teachers utilize behaviors that reduce anxiety levels the most.

We did not expect the grouping of the following three behaviors in this factor: "maintain eye contact;" "calling them by name;" and "greeting them as they enter the classroom." Perhaps we have overlooked the importance of these three behaviors in helping to create an overall "gestalt" of feeling safe. Then again, they may do nothing towards creating this feeling. They may just group in the area because they make students feel good. It would seem like there would be a strong relationship between feeling good and feeling safe. Maybe that is why they group in this factor.

The factor (#2) identified as "willingness to listen" came as no surprise. We have often heard people associate listening with caring, e.g., they say things like "he doesn't care, he is not even listening!" The three behaviors identified as listening behaviors are easily

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discernible, e.g., if you let students make decisions you have to listen; if you ask questions, you have to listen; if you make time for them; and take an interest in their personal lives, you will have to listen and ask questions.

While they were not measured in this research as listening behaviors, there are several others that are excellent listening behaviors. One is paraphrasing or as it is sometimes called "active listening" or "reflective listening." The listener uses paraphrasing by stating in his/her own words what they think the speaker said. The other listening behavior is perception checking. The listener states what s/he thinks the speaker is feeling. Paraphrasing is used to make sure you understand what the other person is saying (the cognitive domain). Perception checking is used to make sure you understand what the other person is feeling (the affective domain). The use of these two interpersonal communication techniques allows the listener to consciously and/or subconsciously convey to the speaker that they care and want to understand what the speaker is saying and/or feeling.

We believe that the act of listening is one of the most significant behaviors used in conveying that you care about the other person. It is also one that requires the least effort. Unfortunately, we also believe that many teachers and administrators are better in the "telling" dimension than they are in the "listening" dimension. Bulach (1994) in his research in the areas of group openness and trust found that openness had a "telling" and a "listening" dimension. Scores on the "listening" dimension have consistently been lower than scores on the "telling" dimension.

Factor # 3, "rewarding good behavior" did not emerge as the most frequently used behavior. Perhaps that is because if these behaviors are overused they lose impact. The frequency reported was often, but most teachers responded "often" instead of "always" to these behaviors. The judicious use of these behaviors in the long run may have greater impact if they are not always used. Student's are more likely to take notice when there work is displayed, when they are asked to help, etc. if it doesn't occur all the time. The old adage "don't overdo a good thing!" may be true here.

Conveying to students that your are their friend (factor # 4) is one more way of showing that you care. We think that eating lunch with students periodically, is an important way of showing that you care. Again as with the reward behavior above, it could lose its impact if it is overdone. Certainly, a friend would intervene if you are being picked on. After all what are friends for? We did not expect teachers to allow students to have fun at their expense as often as was reported. The use of this behavior is often used as a test of friendship. If someone lets you do it, you know that they are either afraid of you or they are your friend. Most teachers are not afraid of their students. Consequently, the use of this behavior by students is often a test of friendship.

The "constructive use of criticism" factor (#5) had several negative (reverse scored) and several positive behaviors. The score for the two reverse scored behaviors was around a 4.0 which means that they are seldom used. A score of 5.0 would mean they are never used. Consequently, we have to assume that they are sometimes used. Teachers can show

students that they care by refraining from the use of these two behaviors.

Most teachers reported that they avoided the use of sarcasm and negative criticism and that they recognized academic and extra-curricular achievement. The number of teachers recognizing students for academic achievement was much higher than those who recognized students for extra-curricular achievement. That may have been why this behavior loaded higher on factor # 1 than on factor #5. In our opinion, however, it fits better with factor #5.

Conclusions

A number of behaviors have been identified that can be grouped into five categories of behaviors. If these five categories of behavior are practiced by teachers and administrators a "caring learning community" should be present. While administrators can't use all of the behaviors, e.g., return work promptly, they can support and encourage teachers to use them. The authors concluded that the instrument has great possibilities for use in correlational or causal comparative research, e.g., the effect or relationship of caring behaviors on school climate, achievement, absenteeism, discipline referrals, grade point average, and failure rate. Also, it would be interesting to compare self reported teacher data with students' assessment of teacher behaviors using this instrument.

It is also interesting to note that, with the exception of physiological needs, the use of the behaviors identified by this research effectively operationalizes Maslow's theory of motivation. For example, "reducing anxiety" (factor #1) addresses students' security needs.

Students' belongingness needs are met by behaviors associated with "listening" (factor #2) and "being a friend" (factor #4). Students self-esteem needs are met through "rewarding good behavior" (factor #3) and "appropriate use of criticism" (factor #5). This allows a student to focus on self-actualization needs so learning can occur. We conclude that if teachers and administrators practice the five categories of behaviors identified in this research a "caring learning community" will be present and increased learning will occur.

Administrators need to be aware of behaviors that could positively affect student achievement. With this awareness they will be able to help create learning communities where students and staff can experience success and self-actualize.

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Table #1. Factor loadings on the factor "ability to reduce anxiety."

Factor	Factor Loading	Caring Behaviors
#1	.7065	maintain eye contact with students when I talk to them.
#1	.6610	teach students at their ability level.
#1	.5461	give students positive reinforcement for good behavior.
#1	.5268	create an environment where students feel safe.
#1	.4312	am positive with students.
#1	.4089	enforce the same rules for all students.
#1	.3999	give students cues when they don't understand or respond.
#1	.3914	call students by their name.
#1	.3878	provide an orderly classroom.
#1	.3511	greet students when they enter my room.

Table #2. Factor loadings on the factor "ability to listen."

Factor	Factor Loading	Caring Behaviors
#2	.6915	give students opportunities to make decisions that affect them.
#2	.6508	take a personal interest in what students do outside my classroom.
#2	.4781	ask students for their opinions.
#2	.2515	make time for students before and after school.

Table #3. Factor loadings on the factor "rewarding good behavior."

Factor	Factor Loading	Caring Behaviors
#3	.7380	display students' work.
#3	.6707	provide students with "treats" and "goodies" on special occasions.
#3	.5932	ask students to help with classroom tasks.
#3	.5878	inform parents about their student's progress.

Table #4. Factor loadings on the factor "being a friend."

Factor	Factor Loading	Caring Behaviors
#4	.6027	eat lunch with students.
#4	.5848	return work promptly with comments.
#4	.4274	allow students to have fun at my expense.
#4	.3735	intervene when students pick on each other.

Table #5. Factor loadings on the factor "appropriate use of criticism."

Factor	Factor Loading	Caring Behaviors
#5	.7125	use sarcasm with students.
#5	.7034	use negative criticism with students.
#5	.4233	recognize students for extra-curricular achievement.
#5	.2882	recognize students for academic achievement.

Table #6. Caring behaviors usage frequency.

Frequency	Factor	Caring Behaviors
4.74	#1	I create an environment where students feel safe.
4.72	#1	I maintain eye contact with students when I talk to them.
4.69	#1	I call students by their name.
4.54	#1	I am positive with students.
4.48	#1	I greet students when they enter my room.
4.45	#1	I give students cues when they don't understand or respond.
4.43	#1	I enforce the same rules for all students.
4.42	#1	I provide an orderly classroom.
4.35	#1	I give students positive reinforcement for good behavior.
4.28	#1	I teach students at their ability level.
4.23	#3	I ask students to help with classroom tasks.
4.17	#5	I recognize students for academic achievement.
4.12	#4	I return work promptly with comments.
4.12	#4	I intervene when students pick on each other.
4.11	#2	I take a personal interest in what students do outside my classroom.
4.06*	#5	I use sarcasm with students.
4.05	#4	I allow students to have fun at my expense.
4.05	#2	I make time for students before and after school.
4.04	#2	I ask students for their opinions.
4.03*	#5	I use negative criticism with students.
4.00	#3	I display students' work.
3.97	#2	I give students opportunities to make decisions that affect them.
3.94	#3	I inform parents about their student's progress.
3.80	#5	I recognize students for extra-curricular achievement.
3.55	#3	I provide students with "treats" and "goodies" on special occasions.
2.88	#4	I eat lunch with students.

*reverse scored, e.g., they are caring behaviors if they are not used.

A SURVEY OF THE BEHAVIORAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A TEACHER

Part I--Demographics

Directions: Respond to each item by filling in the blank on the computer scan sheet which most accurately describes you.

1. **Location of Position**

   A. elementary school
   B. middle school
   C. high school
   D. vocational/technical
   E. other

2. **Level of Preparation**

   A. Bachelor's Degree
   B. Master's Degree
   C. Specialist's Degree
   D. Doctorate Degree
   E. Other

3. **Total Years of Teaching Experience**

   A. 0 - 5
   B. 6 - 10
   C. 11 - 15
   D. 16 - 20
   E. 21+

4. **Gender**

   A. female
   B. male

Continued. . . .

Part II--Survey items

Directions: Use the scale below to respond to each item by filling in the blank on the computer scan sheet for the response which comes closest to **describing how often you use the behavior.**

A	B	C	D	E
NEVER	SELDOM	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	ALWAYS

5. I greet students when they enter my room.
6. I call students by their name.
7. I give students positive reinforcement for good behavior.
8. I enforce the same rules for all students.
9. I inform parents about their student's progress.
10. I recognize students for academic achievement.
11. I recognize students for extra-curricular achievement.
12. I display students' work.
13. I eat lunch with students.
14. I provide an orderly classroom.
15. I take a personal interest in what students do outside my classroom.
16. I give students opportunities to make decisions that affect them.
17. I create an environment where students feel safe.
18. I teach students at their ability level.
19. I make time for students before and after school.
20. I maintain eye contact with students when I talk to them.
21. I ask students for their opinions.
22. I return work promptly with comments.
23. I give students cues when they don't understand or respond.
24. I use negative criticism with students.
25. I ask students to help with classroom tasks.
26. I am positive with students.
27. I provide students with "treats" and "goodies" on special occasions.
28. I allow students to have fun at my expense.
29. I use sarcasm with students.
30. I intervene when students pick on each other.